



# A Saga of Social Suffering:

## Possibilities of Social Regeneration in Khaled Hosseini's Novels

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**Abstract :** Foregrounding the literature as a vehicle of social regeneration and as a medium of awakening a social sensibility, the present paper, studies the works of Khaled Hosseini. The three of his novels selected for the study present a socio-political set up of Afghanistan. The paper will analyze his novels depicting the harsh realities of war, fundamentalism of taliban, social injustice, loss of human lives, suffering of those who are alive and ultimately, love and companionship that conquers all. Hosseini has portrayed love as a bond developing between the social victims that helps them survive the cruelties of the times. The paper will critically scrutinize the inherent socio-cultural tribulations in human fate that come to the fore through the writings of Hosseini. It will also delve deep into the ways in which humans suffer and how Hosseini has stimulated a social consciousness and sensibility through his work.

**IndexTerms** -Sensibility, social consciousness, Regeneration

Literature, time and again, has been a subject of accusation for being isolated from the real world and its affairs. However, this belief is rather too naïve and limiting. If history is the record of man's actions, literature is a document of his thoughts and ideas. It is indisputable that a writer holds an immense power and responsibility in a society. History is the witness that literary texts have brought upheavals in the society from time to time. It is quite ironic that apparently Literature or literary art does not seem to have much of the utilitarian value, it, in fact, holds the ultimate power to transform the society. It is its adherence to the non-conformity of the status-quo that advocates its potentiality of a possible regeneration of individuals and the society at large.

Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan born American novelist, has familiarized his readers with the sufferings and miseries of a particular section of the social world through his work. All three of his books, *The Kite Runner* (2003), *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007) and *And the Mountains Echoed* (2013), present a socio-political set up in Afghanistan. His work, in a way, can be termed as historical fiction. The narratives that run through the novels may be unreal but the war and its disasters, agony and misfortunes that had been in the fate of Afghanistan are real. The characters of Mariam, Hasan, Abdullah may be fictional but there had been numerous Mariams, Hasans and Abdullaha who have undergone a desolation that can be empathized only through these imaginary characters. These texts, thus, become a window for a reader to peep into the world of

Afghan along with its cultural singularities, its fundamentalist regime, its historical tragedies and subsequently, its social mobility. It is only when the reader comprehends the pity, the distress and the terror people have undergone in the history of Afghan, only when he cries along with the characters in the novel and only when he rises from his passive state of conformity that the literary art succeeds in awakening of the social sensibility and the collective consciousness.

Hosseini retells the troubled history of Afghan through his powerful narrative of family, friendship, love and ultimately, hope. He reproduces the lived experience of numerous Afghans during Soviet invasion and under Taliban takeover, to let his readers peep into a world full of wars, sufferings, hunger, deaths, anarchy and oppression. His novels, in a way, are a social document that holds the experiences of the people of Afghanistan, a document that contains in it not the facts and the numbers but the tales of their loss, agony and turbulence. It is through these tales that the reader participate in a world of experience that differs drastically from theirs and it is through it that they get acquainted with an all together different facet of human life and fate. A literary text, then, has not just its aesthetical value but also possesses a power to familiarize its readers with the complexity of a reality they are away from and sometimes, to de-familiarize them with the reality they already are a part of. Exercising them, eventually, enhances the sensibilities and consciousness of the readers leading to their metamorphosis and regeneration at individual level in particular and at social level at large.

The stories told in all the three novels originate from a very personal and an intimate space and eventually, grows into a broad and historical record of Afghanistan. They began with the pre-war days where people were living in peace and were happy in their own world. The writer traces a past that existed in Afghanistan before the communist revolution. A world where a nine-year-old Laila rose from her bed... hungry for the sight of her friend Tariq and where Pari and her brother Abdullah sleep together in their cot, their heads touching, and their limbs tangled. The happy world soon gets disturbed by the external turmoil of the war that began in Afghanistan in 1978 leading to an event that tears their lives apart. At first, Afghanistan's troubles seemed to be only a temporary interruption of the way of life but soon, people realize that the loss is irrevocable. As Hassan writes to Amir that Afghanistan of their youth has been long dead. The war, then, made them flee, to take refuge in other countries. But when they leave their country, they carry their memories along and sometimes, these memories bring them back. It is the writer's obsession with the past that makes his characters come back, not to stay, but to undo some past mistakes and to redeem themselves. Their suffering is caused not only by the external chaos but also by an internal conflict. Past haunts and memory plays an important role. For some it is the presence of the memory that haunts and for some it is the absence. The narratives are not necessarily chronological. They make several spatio-temporal jumps. Where the first novel, *The Kite Runner*, tells a tale from a singular perspective, the second novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, has been narrated from a dual perspective. *And the Mountains Echoed*, on the other hand, can be comprehended as a compilation of several smaller narratives and has multiple perspectives. After the atonement has been made, obstacles have been overthrown and lovers have been reunited, the cycle comes to its close and so does the novel. Ultimately, it is the human connection that help the characters survive and the hope that sustains all.

The narratives are recounted in the backdrop of the history. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, the portrayal of women brings to the fore the cruelty of men and its acceptance in the society. When Jalil got engaged in an illegitimate affair with Nana impregnating her with Mariam, it was he who got accepted but not the women, Mariam and Nana. In fact, the novel begins with Mariam being five years old when she heard the word *harami*, underlining her illegitimacy that will shape her entire life in years to come. Throughout her life, Mariam sees herself as something which is unwanted and as an illegitimate person who would never have a legitimate claim to the things other people have, things such as love, family, home and acceptance. Her fate leads her into a forceful marriage with Rasheed, who was thrice her age. In his novels, Hosseini depicts not only the cultural singularities of Afghanistan but also pictures a contrasting cultural image of US, the country people take refuse in leaving their war torn country behind, as oblivious of the devastation of the people in Afghan. In *And the Mountains Echoed*, Idris, who strengthen a bond with Roshi in Kabul, eventually forgets about her as soon as he is back in America. The clutches of Kabul loosen its grip in consumerist America. The desperation of the two childless mothers Mariam and Soraya signifies the Afghan's loss of its people. However, the reaction they received from their respective husbands is drastically different. Rashid in Kabul made Mariam's life a living hell, whereas Soraya in US was always supported by Amir.

Historical tragedies in Afghanistan were devastating. They lead to a situation where a young woman has to give in marrying an old man of his grandfather's age lest she should be abducted or raped. Hussein's works showcase the troubled state of affairs in a war-torn nation deprived of the basic necessities of its citizen, where the statistics announce that one out of four children will die before reaching the age of five. Therefore, a finger has to be cut in order to save a hand. Pari was sold to Mr. Wahdati and Aziza was sent to an orphanage by her parents. The tormented history of the nation also includes the history of Hazaras and the class struggle between them and Pashtuns. Rape of Hassan, a Hazara boy by Assef, a Pashtun, is an important symbol by the writer to suggest the social status of Hazaras in their community. It is significant to note that later Sohrab, the son of Hassan was found to be a victim of the same. Suppression of the father and the son against the same force hints at the history of the struggle of the community of Hazaras over generations. Amir, a Pashtun boy, refused to take a stand for Hassan but his constant guilt frees him only when he raises his voice against the injustice done to little Sohrab.

War and terror in a nation is always followed by a huge social mobility. People leave their nation to find refuge in other countries. Amir and Baba moved to California, Tariq with his family went to Pakistan and Pari with her mother Nila Wahdati flee to Paris, only to come back to their childhood homes, for something that was left undone. The persistence of the past and a journey back home is a common motif in all three of his books. The characters go back to Afghanistan, to sell this land, sell that house, collect the money. However, sometimes the reasons that bring them back are more profound. Amir returns to Kabul to redeem himself of the guilt he had been living with for years. Laila wanted her dead parents to see the Kabul of their dreams through her eyes and Pari returned to her brother, who has been her forgotten yet real home. Since, the stories cover a long span of years; it is, then, the memory that becomes an important motif that recurs throughout. It is the absence of the memory that kept reminding Pari of the emptiness of her life and the presence of the memory that kept reminding Abdullah of her sister.

It is ultimately the love that survives. It is the companionship that wins. When the political events intersect with the private lives of people, the outer conflicts traverse the internal strife; the people suffered from both the wars and are ultimately saved by love and human connection. Amir, the childless man and the victim of his guilt, atones for his betrayal to Hassan by adopting his son Sohrab after Hassan has died. Sohrab, on the other hand, was doubly colonized, for being an Afghani and a Hazara. The novel ends with the beginning of a union between the two and with a hope that sustains their lives. In another novel, Mariam, a victim of illegitimacy, a *Harami* (Bastard), realizes the betrayal she had done to her mother by choosing Jalil, her father over her. It was her mother who bears a shame of raising a *harami* sacrificing her dignity. Mariam redeems herself by sacrificing her life for her daughter-like Laila and thus, provides for herself a legitimate ending to her illegitimate life. In the third novel, Pari, a victim of forgetfulness, struggles throughout her life to discover her unknown roots. Abdullah, her brother, on the other hand, is a victim of his memories of his beloved sister. Conclusively, the two reunited. Ironically, however, when they unite, it is the forgetfulness that clutches Abdullah in the shape of Alzheimer and a regaining of memories that holds Pari. Nevertheless, they found each other.

In one of his interviews, Khaled Hussein states that if, despite the huge cultural differences, his readers can identify themselves with the characters of Amir, Mariam and Abdullah and get transformed somehow by the experiences of these characters, his work as a writer is done. If an art doesn't invoke masses, it is not an art. The novels by Hussein are set in the backdrop of a chaotic political environment and a distressed cultural domain. They engage readers in its narratives and provide a depth, nuance and an emotional subtext to the familiar image of Afghanistan. They make them aware with the past that existed once in the nation and keep it alive in public consciousness. His literary texts delve deep into the ways in which humans suffer and stimulate a social consciousness and sensibility through them leading to a social regeneration.

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